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R. STRAUSS

ELEKTRA

A GUIDE TO THE OPERA

ERNEST HUTCHESON

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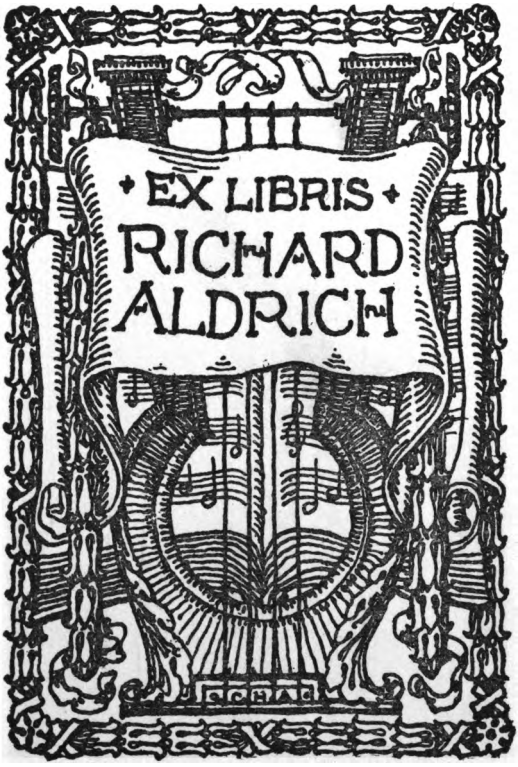

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ELEKTRA

BY

RICHARD STRAUSS

A GUIDE TO THE OPERA

WITH MUSICAL EXAMPLES
FROM THE SCORE

BY

ERNEST HUTCHESON

NEW YORK: G. SCHIRMER
BOSTON: BOSTON MUSIC CO.
1910

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	1
THE DRAMA	11
THE MUSIC	17

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ELEKTRA

INTRODUCTION

"I have in my hand a copy of the most infamous, the most scandalous, the most mischievous, the most blackguardly book that ever escaped burning at the hands of the common hangman. I have not read it: I would not soil my mind with such filth; but I have read what the papers say of it."

When Bernard Shaw puts the above words into the mouth of Roebuck Ramsden, he describes exactly the typical attitude of prejudice that has been assumed in many quarters toward Strauss's latest music-drama. "Elektra" has been condemned, over and over again, and chiefly by persons who have not "soiled their minds" by hearing it or consulting the piano score, for lack of melody, for noisiness, for unbearable cacophony, for complexity, for the enormous orchestra required to perform it. Strauss himself is roundly abused for his choice of "morbid" subjects, and his artistic sincerity is freely called in question. These are criticisms which, after our experience with Wagner and his works, should be advanced with due caution; we have seen them urged,

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reiterated and insisted on, only to expend their force in empty air. At the same time, they are perennially revived in the case of every composer who startles us by innovations, and it may therefore be timely to offer a few words of answer to the points raised. It would surely be well if we could get rid of facile misconceptions, put lurid newspaper accounts behind us, and prepare to examine the real merits or demerits of "Elektra" with candor and impartiality.

1. Perhaps nothing is more curious to the musician than the narrow conception of "melody" prevalent in the public mind. It is time for us to realize, first, that there are many different styles of melody, no particular style having any right to be considered better than another, and secondly, that melody constitutes only a single feature of any musical composition, many admitted masterpieces (*e.g.*, the first movements of Beethoven's fifth and ninth symphonies) containing an infinitesimally small proportion of tunefulness. To instance three widely different types, there is the contrapuntal melodic style of Bach, the lyric melody of Mozart and the older Italian opera, and the modern treatment of musical outline familiarized to us by Wagner and others. The clamor for "melody" usually means a demand

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for Mozartian melody, which is a thing of the past, as impossible to revive as Palestrina's vocal polyphony. Strauss's melody is inevitably modern, but it is none the less true melody. Nor does it by any means appear in mere snatches, soon lost in a storm of discord: there are in "Elektra" many long passages of continuously tuneful character. Indeed, no composer since Wagner has created so much pure melody as Richard Strauss, his songs alone offering conclusive evidence of his lyrical gift.

2. It is safe to say that whenever music is not understood it seems "noisy," without any reference to the proportion of *forte* and *piano* contained in it. In this sense Strauss will unavoidably seem noisy to many listeners; otherwise the criticism is just as absurd as it was when directed against Mozart, Beethoven, and Wagner. In actual fact, Strauss's use of the sustained *fortissimo* is, at least in "Elektra," very restrained; true, he piles up tremendous sonorities to meet appropriate situations, but these climaxes are held in discreet reserve, never losing their effectiveness by excessive frequency or prolongation. On the other hand, he is master of the sustained *pianissimo*, and it is one of his peculiarities that he shows a predilection for thrilling *pianos* in

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conveying impressions of awe and agony. A magnificent example of this is the unearthly hush predominating during the greater part of the weird scene between Clytemnestra and Electra.

3. The use of dissonance has steadily grown in boldness since the day when Monteverde was venturesome enough to introduce an "unprepared" dominant seventh. Every composer who outruns contemporaneous taste is accused of cacophony. We must reflect that there is nothing fixed or immutable in our standard of beauty and euphony; history has proved, not once but many times, that much which seems strange and repellent to the ears of one generation is accepted as lovely and natural by the next. It is necessary, however, to distinguish between sounds harsh only because of their unfamiliarity and the dissonances deliberately employed for the artistic purposes of program-music. No longer is it possible to deny any composer the right to depict forbidding subjects or emotions by corresponding musical treatment. The only question open to discussion is whether, in so doing, he gains an effect sufficiently great to justify the means. For example, "Siegfried" abounds in music intentionally unlovely, but the temporary sacri-

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fices of beauty to dramatic exigencies are justified and compensated for by the gain of the work as a whole in variety, color, and accurate characterization. Unfortunately, the average listener is incapable of adjudging the *proportion* of purposeful dissonance in a large work: amazed and horror-struck, he succumbs to the first shock and probably retains a permanent impression of confusion founded on a few isolated passages. Strauss's cacophonies, startling as they undoubtedly are, uncompromisingly as they are used where logically necessary, bear an insignificant relation to the totality of his art.

4. The enlargement of the orchestra is again a process which has continued uninterruptedly since the time of Haydn. Instruments were successively added until, at the beginning of the Romantic period, the palette of tone-color was fairly complete. After Berlioz had modernized orchestral technique by his unerring insight into the individualities of the various instruments, it remained for Wagner to demonstrate the advantages of completing each separate group, thus allowing harmony in three or four parts to be written in an absolutely homogeneous *timbre*. The "Hunding" motive in "Die Walküre" will at once suggest itself to the reader as an excellent

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illustration. On this principle Strauss proceeds, increasing the numbers of his orchestra, not to obtain greater volume of tone (for which our resources are already adequate) but to gain special effects of color; and in this he follows an entirely natural and proper line of development.

5. The art of music is constantly becoming more complex in certain directions and simpler in others. Harmony and orchestration have tended, throughout the modern period, toward ever greater complexity, though the most involved harmony of to-day is simplicity itself compared with the strict counterpoint of Palestrina and Bach.* The *form* of the modern music-drama, on the other hand, is one of the simplest yet evolved, far more easily explicable to the uninitiated than the structure of a fugue or a symphony. But the comparative complexity or simplicity of a composition is in no way a criterion of its value, and nothing can be more absurd than to demand of a great work that it be easily apprehended at a first hearing. Who expects to understand Bach's fugal choruses, or Beethoven's ninth symphony, or "Die Meistersinger," without some

* Remember that harmony and counterpoint are no longer sharply distinct from each other, our present style being a combination of the two.

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preliminary study? Nay, what percentage of concert and opera-goers ever do understand these works? It may openly be admitted, therefore, that "Elektra" is complex and requires elucidation, — hence the present "guide."

6. The points hitherto discussed, though certainly not devoid of interest, are inconclusive in forming an estimate of any composer. The fact that new works are difficult to grasp, and antagonize our preconceived ideas of melody, harmony, *et cetera*, proves little or nothing, the works themselves remaining good, bad, or indifferent, as the case may be. The prevailing character of a composer's music, however, is a valuable index of his real worth. If it were true, therefore, that Strauss showed a preference for morbid and unhealthy subjects, a fair argument, a just criticism, might find basis. Now, the only reasonable way of determining the truth on this point is to examine the subject-matter of his tonal structures. Even the most hasty inquiry makes it quite clear that he shows no particular preference for any one type of subject. "Don Juan," "Death and Transfiguration," and "Guntram" are idealistic in character, the last-named almost impossibly so; "Ein Heldenleben" and the "Sinfonia domestica" belong to the same cate-

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gory. "Till Eulenspiegel" and "Don Quixote" are humorous, "Macbeth" tragic, "Feuersnoth" romantic. "Also sprach Zarathustra," a philosophic subject, stands in a class by itself. "Salome" is the only work founded on material which offers possible ground for objection and controversy. "Elektra" is gloomy and tragic in the extreme, but not morbid. The conclusion is evident that Strauss chooses his subjects simply because they appeal to his artistic sense and inspire him with musical suggestions; he would no more seek out a morbid theme than he would go out of his way to avoid it.

7. The sincerity of an artist's purpose is vital to his enduring fame. I invite those who doubt Strauss's entire sincerity to study his symphonic poems and music-dramas, from "Don Juan" to "Elektra," to mark the gradual growth of his powerful individuality, and then to consider whether such steady, uninterrupted progress is compatible with the assumption of affectation. It is perfectly open to us to view the development of Strauss's genius with like or dislike; the fact remains that it *does* develop. I contend that, where affectation steps in, artistic progress necessarily ceases, stagnation and moral death resulting. And, whatever else we may think of

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Richard Strauss, his creations unquestionably throb with the pulse of intense life. They will not down, cannot be dismissed with loose argument or superficial criticism, and cry aloud for fair trial and judgment.

No musician has cause to quarrel with the honest amateur who hears a Bach fugue or a Beethoven symphony, studies it to the best of his ability, and yet fails to like or admire. So also with "Elektra." While I have endeavored to remove some common misapprehensions, I do not for a moment presume to dictate to individual opinion and feeling. Only, let every one examine for himself the real questions at issue, reserving his verdict until he has acquired a right to pronounce it. We need feel no shame if we at first stand aghast before the unparalleled boldness of the score, the complete absence of concession to musical conventions and prejudices. Close study is needed to reveal the full beauty and inspiration of the work, the nobility of its conception, the prodigal wealth of inventive power, the intrinsic musical value of the themes, the masterly characterizations, the logical perfection of workmanship and development. These points, whether admitted or disputed, must at

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least be regarded as fundamental in the formation of a true estimate; to them, accordingly, rather than to minor and irrelevant details, I would earnestly direct attention.

ERNEST HUTCHESON.

BALTIMORE, MD., *January*, 1910.

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THE DRAMA

VON HOFMANNSTHAL'S plot may be summarized as follows: —

Agamemnon, on his return from the Trojan war, is treacherously murdered by his false wife Clytemnestra and Ægisthus, her lover. Clytemnestra herself performs the deed, slaying Agamemnon with a hatchet while he is in his bath, the unmanly Ægisthus merely assisting. The guilty pair then assume the government of Mycenæ, and Orestes, the young son of Agamemnon, is banished. Chrysothemis and Electra, the daughters, are virtually held prisoners in the palace. We gather that they are not allowed to marry, for their children would naturally, according to the Greek ethical code, become avengers of Agamemnon. Electra makes no attempt to conceal her abhorrence of Clytemnestra and Ægisthus, and is therefore subjected to every imaginable indignity; she is clothed in rags, beaten by Ægisthus, threatened with the dungeon, and her food (after she has refused to eat with the servants) is thrown to her with that of the dogs. Chrysothemis, of a more time-serving disposition, is treated with leniency.

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It is the sacred obligation of Orestes to avenge his father's murder. Counseled by the oracle of Apollo, he comes to Mycenæ with an old attendant, bringing a fabricated story of his own death. By this artifice the two easily gain admittance to the palace and kill Clytemnestra and Ægisthus. Most of the retainers at once declare themselves for Orestes, and he quickly makes himself master of the town, amid general rejoicing. Electra sings a pæan of triumph and performs a ceremonial dance in honor of Agamemnon's memory, but her weakened frame succumbs to the emotional strain and she suddenly falls dead.

It is interesting to compare with this version the story as told by the Greek dramatists. In the "Choephori" of Æschylus, Orestes is accompanied by his friend Pylades instead of an attendant. At the conclusion, the Furies of his mother appear to torment and pursue him, and he goes to Delphi to seek purification. In a sequel, "The Furies," he stands trial at the Areopagus and is acquitted, being protected by Apollo and Minerva. Otherwise the tale is almost identical with that of von Hofmannsthal.

Still more closely does the modern writer follow the version of Sophocles. Compare espe-

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cially the scene in which Electra, after hearing of Orestes' death, endeavors to persuade Chrysothemis to join her in the work of retribution, and, being unable to enlist the aid of her shrinking sister, determines to act alone. Sophocles has caused a messenger to herald the actual entrance of Orestes by a circumstantial account of the latter's supposed fate. This is omitted by von Hofmannsthal; on the other hand, Electra's ceremonial dance and death are not alluded to by any of the Greek dramatists. Pylades does not figure among the *dramatis personæ* of Sophocles' play.

The "Elektra" of Euripides contains many departures from the earlier dramas of Æschylus and Sophocles, and suffers very considerably from the unavoidable comparison. Electra is forced into marriage with a peasant, who respects her sufficiently to be her husband in name only. The character of Pylades is included, but he appears merely as a dumb personage. After the catastrophe, Orestes is advised by Castor and Pollux to seek purification, and Electra is wedded to Pylades. The action is wearisome, the development inartistic.

Let us now briefly examine the characters of the tragedy as presented by von Hofmannsthal.

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Clytemnestra is an utterly depraved woman, first an adulteress, then the murderer of her husband, and after the murder a most unnatural mother because she fears vengeance from her children. Her physical sufferings, her superstitious terrors, her ineffectual attempts to appease the gods and escape her fate, invest the character with pathos and even with a certain dignity. Ægisthus is represented as an effeminate weakling; too cowardly to slay Agamemnon himself, he is none the less guilty of the murder: we regard him with contempt even more than with hatred. He plays but a small part in the action, not appearing on the stage until his doom is imminent. Orestes is in the main an instrument of divine retribution; there are, however, in the long scene between him and Electra, many human touches which command our sympathy and interest. Chrysothemis, the most normal person of the play, offers a strong relief to the prevailing atmosphere of tragic foreboding. She fills her extraordinarily difficult position much as any young girl might be expected to, hoping for better times, taking no decided part, but ready enough to rejoice when others intervene and life opens out before her; altogether she is a distinctly likable, natural maiden. Between

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her and Electra, the central figure, a great gulf of temperament is fixed. The latter is a noble and passionate nature warped from its course by untoward circumstances. Forgetfulness of her father is impossible to her, and the avenging of his death becomes the sole aim of her existence. Everything is sacrificed to the supreme object — love, joy, beauty, health. "The dead," she says to Orestes, "are jealous." She is the incarnate spirit of an unrelenting hatred directed against Clytemnestra and Ægisthus, yet this very hate is rooted in love for her father. There is no selfish element in it; not once does she mention the personal injuries she has suffered, not even reproaching Clytemnestra with them or referring to them when she bares all the trouble of her heart to Orestes. When the guilty queen and her lover meet their deserved doom, she displays no vindictiveness, but immediately forgets them and rejoices that Agamemnon's perturbed spirit may at last find rest, that the rites due to the king's memory may be fittingly observed. Her love for Orestes is beautiful and touching, and it is clear that she is capable of equal affection for Chrysothemis were the shadow darkening their lives and forming a source of disagreement but removed. It is allowable to infer that

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Electra's reason has been affected by her unswerving devotion to a dreadful ideal and the physical ill-treatment and neglect heaped on her.

The other personages are of minor importance, but they are all drawn with care and distinction.

The drama contains only one act. The unities are strictly regarded, the action is rapid and concentrated; ample contrast is provided in the various dialogues. The ancient convention that no killing should be done on the stage is preserved. The resistless approach of fate, so essential a feature of Greek tragedy, is strongly emphasized. The final scene (original, as we have seen, with von Hofmannsthal) is finely conceived; it diverts our minds from horror to the triumph of justice, and this final mood is sufficiently sustained to carry us over the death of Electra without a recurrence of gloom. The diction, it must be confessed, lacks classic dignity and restraint, but it is forcefully dramatic and contains many passages of poetic beauty.

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THE MUSIC

THE general scheme of Strauss's setting of "Elektra" is similar to that of Wagner's music-dramas. In other words, the music is a close network of *leading-motives* which supply a continuous commentary on the text. These motives are employed by Strauss with incredible skill, subtlety, and ease.

Broadly speaking, the music of "Elektra" may be divided into the following scenes: —

Introduction. Group of maids drawing water.

1. Electra's monologue.
2. Chrysothemis and Electra.
3. Clytemnestra and Electra (at first with attendants, afterwards the two alone).
4. Chrysothemis and Electra (momentarily interrupted by two men-servants).
5. Electra and Orestes.
6. The Vengeance. Electra alone, then with Chrysothemis and maids, afterwards Electra and Ægisthus.
7. The Triumph. Electra, Chrysothemis, Maids, Chorus behind the scene.

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The reader is now prepared for an analysis of the motive-work. In naming the leading-motives, it will perhaps be observed that I have differed not infrequently, and sometimes radically, from the German "Guide" published by Fürstner of Berlin. For the information of the curious I shall indicate the most important of these differences by means of foot-notes, not doubting that a careful examination will confirm my interpretation. The motives themselves are furnished with Roman numerals for reference; the Arabic numerals added in brackets after each quotation allude to the figures given by Strauss for purposes of rehearsal, these figures agreeing in the piano, vocal, and orchestral scores. The musical quotations are given (though not always literally) from the vocal score, and the themes are usually cited on their first appearance.

The curtain rises with the first notes of the orchestra, disclosing the inner courtyard of the palace at Mycenæ. Maids are seen drawing water from a well; their gossip puts us in possession of the past history necessary to an understanding of the plot and gives us an idea of present conditions within the palace. Electra enters for a moment, but springs hastily back, "like an

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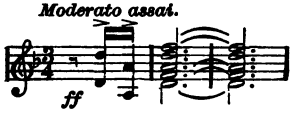
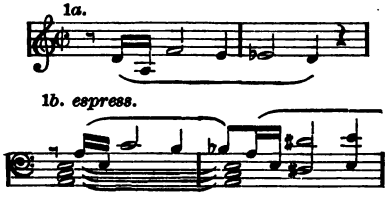
animal to its lair," on seeing that she is not alone.

Several important motives occur in this introduction. The first notes: —

I. AGAMEMNON.

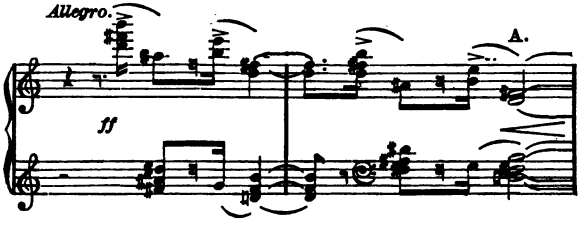


contain the germ of the motive of AGAMEMNON. Later this theme occurs in more extended forms:—



The BLOWS OF THE HATCHET with which Agamemnon was slain are represented as follows: —

II. THE HATCHET. (A. Electra leaping back.)



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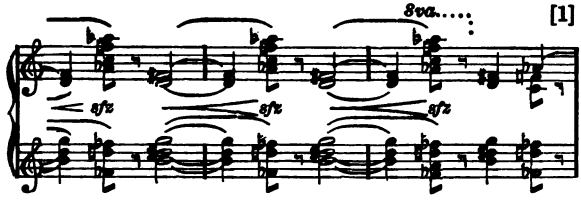
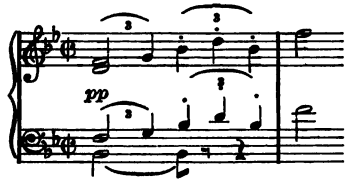
[1]



The passage at A, immediately succeeding the motive of the hatchet, accompanies Electra's hurried retreat from the stage. ELECTRA herself is represented by a theme of royal dignity: —

III. ELECTRA (basic Motive).

[17]



The above theme is subjected in the course of the music-drama to many significant modifications. Most prominent of these, for the present, is a variation which shows Electra as an incarnation of hatred toward the destroyers of her father; it might, indeed, be called the MOTIVE OF HATRED: —

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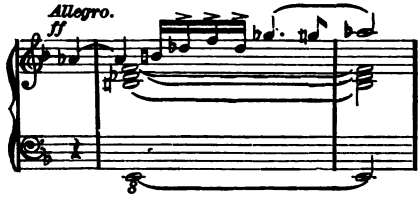
IV. ELECTRA'S HATE.

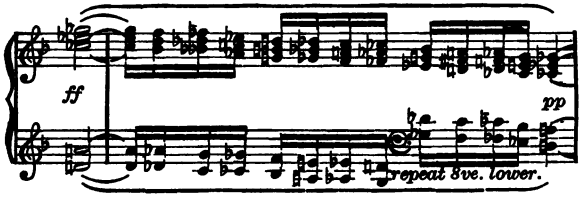
[1–2]



The identity of Nos. III and IV is more easily traced from the printed notes than from the actual sounds, so utterly different in character are they. Especially noteworthy is the extremely bold dissonance on which No. IV is based. This harsh discord is always reminiscent of the murder of Agamemnon, hence its employment to express Electra's hate. The motive of the MURDER consists entirely of chromatic successions of the same weird harmony: —

V. MURDER.

[27]



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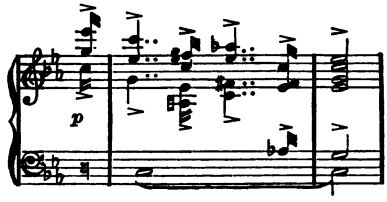
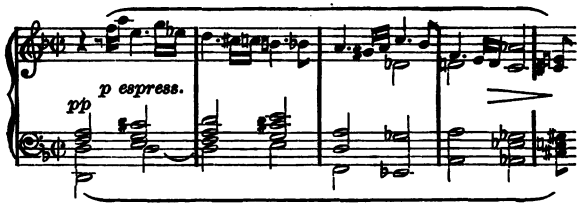
A motive of great beauty describes Electra's mournfully affectionate REMEMBRANCE OF AGAMEMNON *: —

VI. REMEMBRANCE OF AGAMEMNON. [15]



One of the maids speaks sympathetically of Electra. To her, the unfortunate princess is still royal in humiliation; "none in the house dares meet her eye." The girl would "kiss and anoint Electra's feet and dry them with her hair." A motive of SERVICE† gracefully expresses the sentiment: —

VII. SERVICE. [15–16]



* Erroneously quoted in the German "Guide" as the motive of Orestes.

† "Electra degraded to the rank of a servant," according to the German "Guide."

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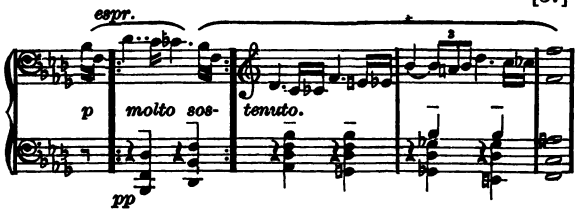
The whole scene is short, and ends with the withdrawal of the maids into the palace. Electra comes forward, and from this time remains on the stage until the curtain falls.

It is the evening hour set apart by Electra for communion with Agamemnon's spirit. The noisy talk of the maids, she fears, has startled his shade back to its "cold caverns." The monologue begins, accordingly, with the motive of hatred. Gentler sounds soon prevail as she calls on her father; we hear the motive of Remembrance, the dignified Electra theme (here in the minor), and after some fragmentary entrances the following beautiful extension of the Agamemnon motive: —

Ic.

[37]



When Electra recalls the murder, No. V appears inverted and in slow time: —

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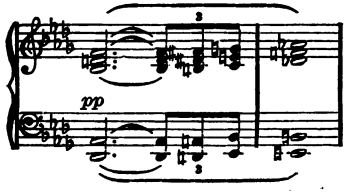
Va.

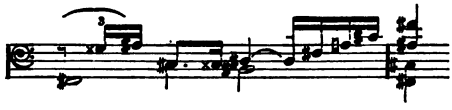
[39]



and with it the motives of CLYTEMNESTRA and ÆGISTHUS: —

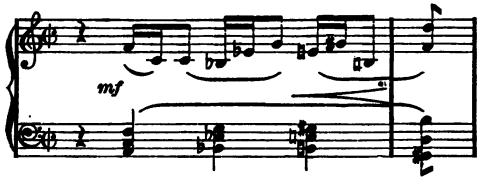
VIII. CLYTEMNESTRA.

[39]



IX. ÆGISTHUS.

[39]



Strauss gives a short but highly realistic musical description of the murder. Observe particularly the setting of the words "and the bath steamed with thy blood," and the succeeding passage picturing the dragging of the corpse

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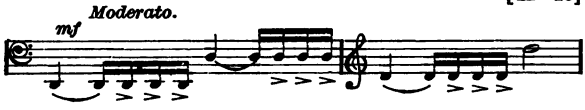
from the room. Electra prophesies the return of the SHADE OF AGAMEMNON to exact retribution.

X. THE SHADE OF AGAMEMNON.
(RETRIBUTION.)

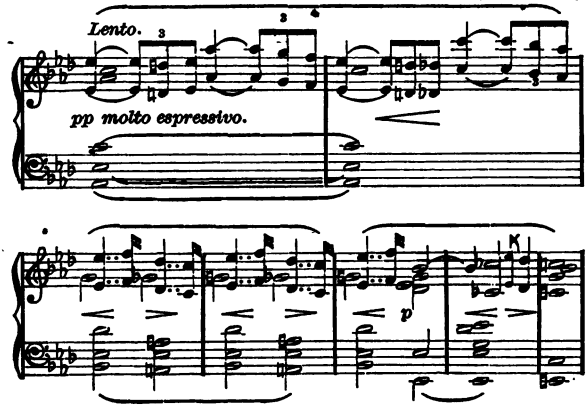
[42–43]



She calls again on her father to show himself to his child, "if only as yesterday, like a shadow against yonder wall," and we are peacefully introduced to one of the loveliest of Strauss's themes, that of AGAMEMNON'S CHILDREN: —

XI. THE CHILDREN OF AGAMEMNON.

[before 46]



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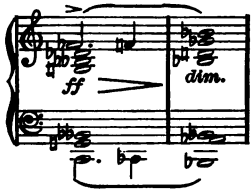
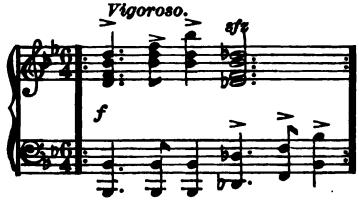
Electra's thoughts now turn to the future accomplishment of vengeance. The gruesome murder motive is used to foretell the death of Clytemnestra and Ægisthus, the passage terminating with a threatening progression which we may term the MOTIVE OF BLOOD: —

XII. BLOOD. [50–51]



Then, ends Electra, shall fit sacrifices be offered to the memory of Agamemnon, and his children shall perform a ceremonial dance at the king's tomb. A rhythmical figure, ♩ ♩ ♪ ♩, begins to assert itself; by degrees it leads into a measured DANCING MOTIVE: —

XIII. THE DANCE. [56–57]



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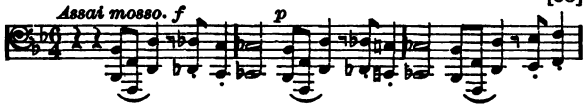
The jubilant tone infects the Agamemnon and Electra motives: —

I*d*.

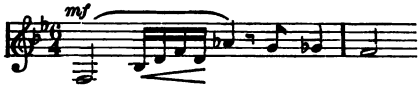
[53]



(Observe the change to the major.)

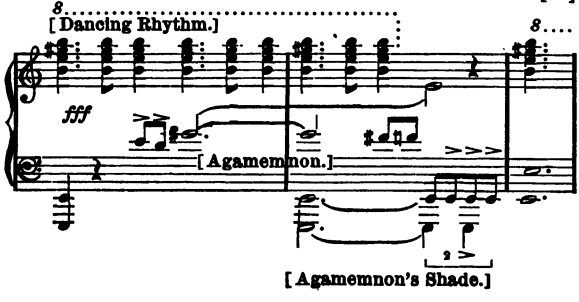
III*b*.

[57–58]



The theme of Agamemnon's children also rings out joyously in *alla breve* time (more than twice as fast as before) against the prevailing $\frac{6}{4}$. A magnificent peroration is reached, in which the motive of Agamemnon's Shade is added: —

[63]



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But now Electra is suddenly awakened from her exalted mood by the entrance of Chrysothemis, who is characterized partly by a motive of HESITATION: —

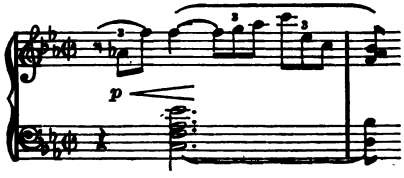
XIV. HESITATION OF CHRYSOTHEMIS

[64]

and partly by a winsome and more personal phrase, the true MOTIVE OF CHRYSOTHEMIS: —

XV. CHRYSOTHEMIS.

[66]



Electra, annoyed by the interruption, greets her sister with scant kindness. A reference to Clytemnestra is accompanied by a new theme of great though somber beauty, the MOTIVE OF DOOM: —

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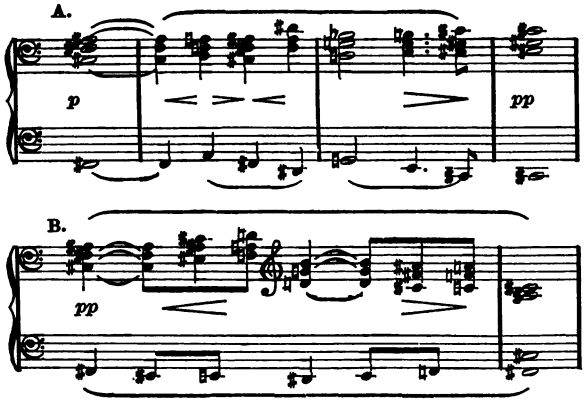
XVI. Doom. [68]



It will be observed that this theme is double. The portion marked A expresses a sense of *impending* doom, B a hopeless reaching out for a possibility of escape.* A and B are most frequently used separately, rarely appearing in immediate conjunction as above; the reader may therefore, if he chooses, legitimately consider them as two distinct motives.

Electra, as Chrysothemis informs her, is

* The present writer assumes the responsibility for this reading. The German Guide gives VIII, XVI A and XVI B as the separate Clytemnestra motives, calling No. VIII "Clytemnestra murders." It must be admitted that XVI is a baffling motive.

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threatened with imprisonment in a dark tower. This WARNING * finds an echo in the score: —

XVII. THE WARNING OF CHRYSOTHEMIS

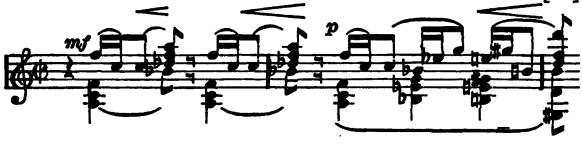
[after 68]

but is heedlessly received by Electra.

An extended version of the motive of Ægisthus, introduced in this scene, deserves attention: —

IX*a*.

[69]



It is not too fanciful to detect in these measures the conscienceless flippancy of Ægisthus. His motive lacks all trace of manliness, and accords well with Electra's contemptuous reference to him and Clytemnestra as "the two women."

Chrysothemis cannot "sit still and stare out into the darkness" like Electra. In a song of considerable length (I use the word "song"

* "The dreadful anxiety of Chrysothemis," says the German Guide.

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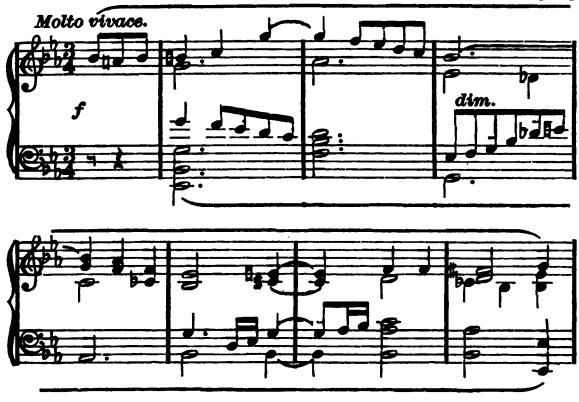
advisedly) she voices her wish to escape from the house of gloom. This LONGING FOR FREEDOM is thus musically conveyed: —

XVIII. DESIRE OF FREEDOM.

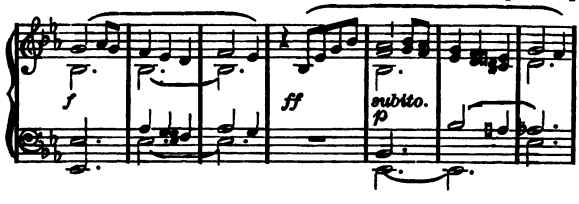
[75]



Chrysothemis would willingly forget past horrors in love and marriage; the DESIRE OF MOTHERHOOD is strong in her: —

XIX. DESIRE OF MOTHERHOOD.

[86–87]



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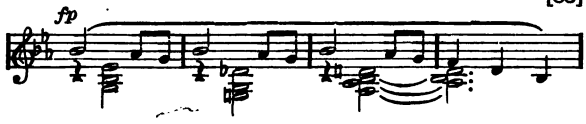
XIX*a*.

[88]

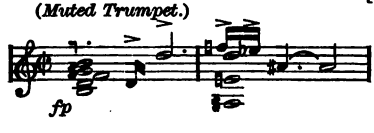


Whereunto the endless lament, the fruitless waiting for Orestes' coming? "I am a woman," she exclaims impetuously, "and wish a woman's fate." The broad melodic curves of Nos. XVIII and XIX are remarkable; in consonance with the character of Chrysothemis, the whole song is normal and natural. We perceive the same musical quality in No. XI and other motives, and it is instructive to contrast these with such themes as II and V and to note the æsthetic reasons for the difference.

Tumultuous sounds are suddenly heard from within the house; the subdued uproar is depicted by the motive of murder. Chrysothemis explains that Clytemnestra has been disturbed by a DREAM OF ORESTES, the avenger: —

XX. DREAM OF ORESTES.

[before 120]



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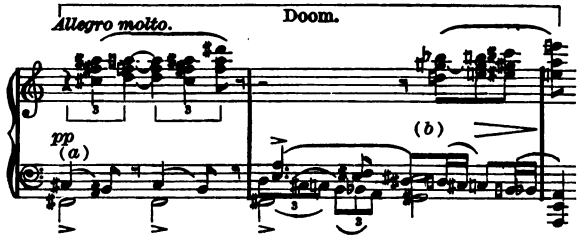
The superstitious queen is accordingly coming to sacrifice to the gods, and the noise is caused by her approach with her attendants and the lowing and trampling of the animals being driven to the altars. The description of the strange procession is based on the following complex motive: —

XXI. The Procession

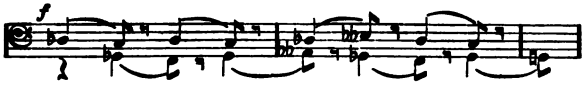
[8]



in which (a) suggests the trampling of the beasts and (b) is used as a figure of flight. As the tumult increases, the trampling motive appears in imitation and in diminution: —

XXI*b*.

[126–127]



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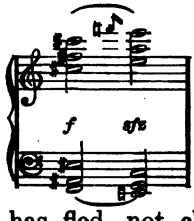
XXI*b*. [129]

A climax is reached when Clytemnestra, heavily bedecked with jewels and amulets, shows herself at a broad window, leaning on her confidante and attended by her trainbearer. Her pale face looks ghastly in the torchlight, the more so for the scarlet robe she wears. Electra draws herself up haughtily and the two confront each other; the brass thunders out Electra's motive (III), and Clytemnestra's terror is indicated by a curious orchestral shriek: —



Chrysothemis has fled, not choosing to meet Clytemnestra, who is "most terrible when she trembles." The interview between the queen and Electra, however, assumes a deceptive aspect of calm. The motive of hate flares up once in the beginning, but instantly sinks to a mere murmur which persists through several pages of the vocal score: —

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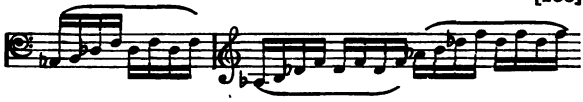
(Cf. IV.)

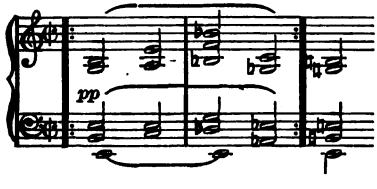
[133]



Clytemnestra suffers tortures both bodily and mental; she is a prey to disease and remorse. When she asks the gods "why they so afflict her," the orchestra suggests her blood-guiltiness by No. XII, her yearning for relief by No. XVI B. CLYTEMNESTRA'S SUFFERING is represented as follows: —

XXII. CLYTEMNESTRA'S SUFFERING

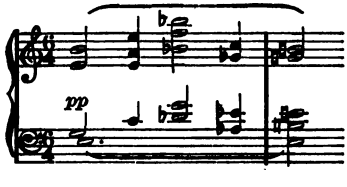
[after 138



the time changing later from ♯ to $\frac{6}{4}$: —

XXII*a*.

[149]



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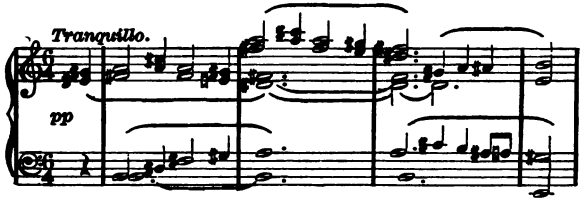
Electra speaks soothingly, and Clytemnestra is ready to seize any crumb of comfort. A MOTIVE OF ASSUAGEMENT * steals gently in: —

XXIII. ASSUAGEMENT.

[148–149]



In spite of the dissuasion of the confidante and the trainbearer, who evidently see their own interest in keeping mother and daughter on bad terms, Clytemnestra dismisses them and descends to the stage in order to talk more intimately with Electra. The maids with the torches disappear, and only stray gleams of light from within the palace mitigate the darkness.

A mysterious motive †: —

* The German Guide calls it "The remembrance of lost happiness."

† This motive is named by the German Guide "The glittering of Clytemnestra's jewels." I prefer to put no label on it.

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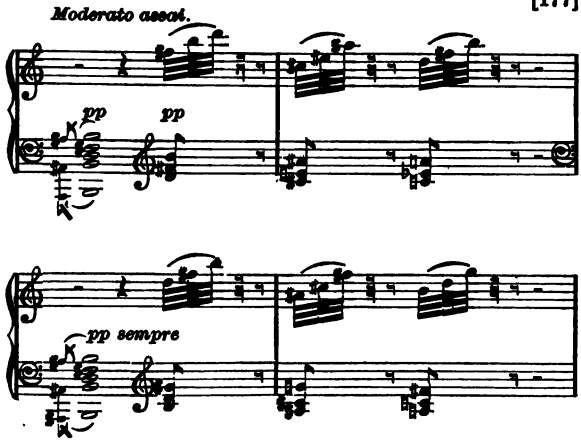
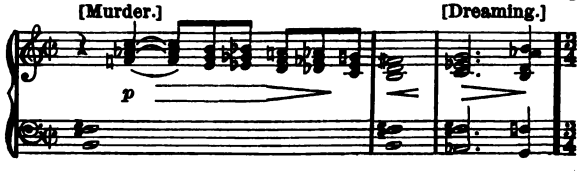
XXIV.

[177]



lends an atmosphere of suspense to the ensuing scene. Clytemnestra complains that her sleep is broken by frightful visions: does Electra know no cure for evil dreams? The interweaving of themes at this moment is very close and more than ordinarily interesting: —

[178]



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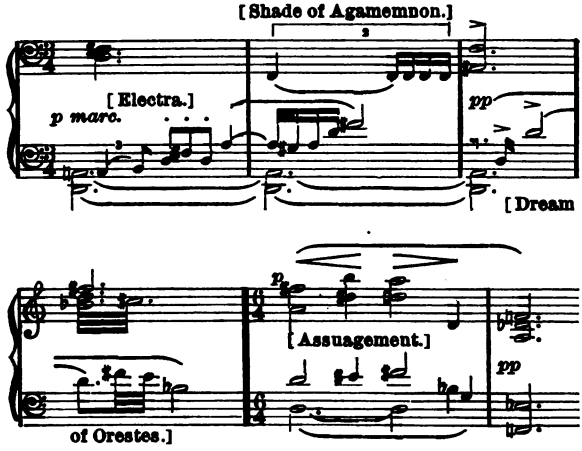
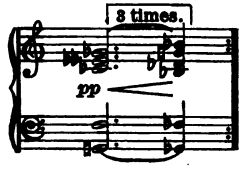


In the above extract the MOTIVE OF DREAMING is new; soon afterwards it is repeated: —

XXV. DREAM MOTIVE.

[before 180]



Clytemnestra enlarges on her sufferings. "Between day and night, when I lie with open eyes, a

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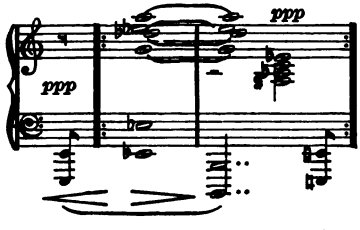
thing of nameless terror creeps upon me. It is no word, no pain, it neither oppresses nor strangles me; it is nothing, not even a nightmare, and yet it is so awful that body and soul cry out for death. Can one undergo dissolution without even being ill? Can one corrupt with waking senses, like a robe eaten away by moths?" To these words Strauss has set music which defies description; he has dared to paint a tonal picture of the corruption mentioned in the text. A grisly succession of unspeakable dissonances shudders and crumbles to dust, all in a tense *pianissimo*. Intangible dread is hinted at by a rising and falling progression in the bass: —

XXVI. NIGHTMARE.

[187]



The memory of Agamemnon and his murder is obviously the cause of Clytemnestra's mortal anguish. This is shown by the thematic structure: —

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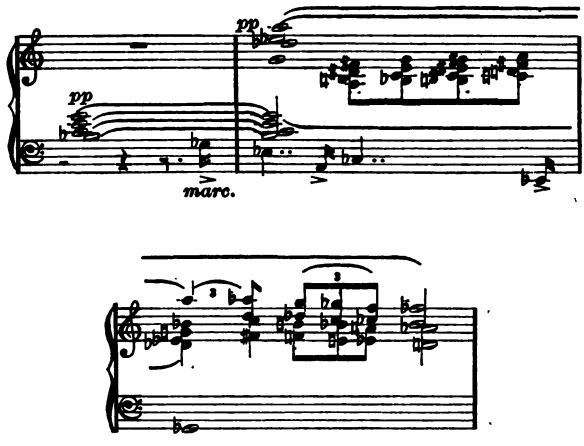
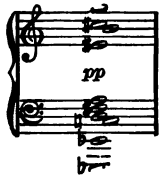
(V.) (V*a*.) (VI.)

[188]



Here we have the motive of remembrance (VI) and both forms of the motive of murder (V and V*a*) in an appalling combination. I quote also a single chord as a specimen of nightmare harmony: —

[after 192]



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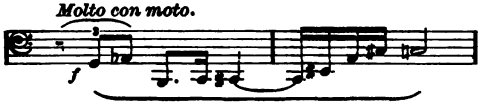
At last the tragic *pianissimo* is abandoned; the motive of Doom enters, leads to a *forte*, and is combined with the murder motive; the gruesome episode comes to a climax and ends. Clytemnestra believes that if she could but ascertain the proper sacrifice the gods would be appeased, and she thinks that Electra can help her. Electra admits that she knows the right offering; once the fitting blood has been shed, Clytemnestra will dream no more. Her meaning is that Clytemnestra herself must die. Fragments of the dancing motive III*b* softly accompany Electra's continued evasions, while Clytemnestra's motive becomes insistently questioning: —

VIII*a*.

[205–207]



Eventually Electra, hard pressed for an answer, abruptly changes the subject and asks if Orestes is to be allowed to return. Here the melody of Agamemnon's Children is roughly interrupted by a new motive suggesting CLYTEMNESTRA'S DEATH-BLOW: —

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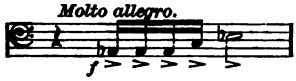
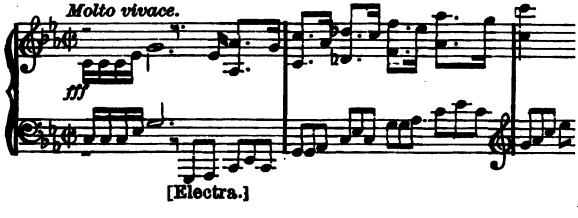
XXVII. Clytemnestra's Death-blow.



The mention of Orestes at once dispels the outwardly pacific tone of the conversation. Clytemnestra loses her temper, and threatens Electra with hunger and the dungeon until she reveals the identity of the wished-for sacrifice. The chords of No. XXIV return in fast $\frac{3}{4}$ time and are lashed into rage (see 224). At this, Electra throws aside her self-restraint and furiously tells Clytemnestra that *her* blood must flow before she will cease to dream. The storm of Electra's denunciation and prophecy of vengeance begins as follows: —

[before 230]



To the figure of pursuit in the above is added the figure of flight from No. XXI, now greatly extended: —

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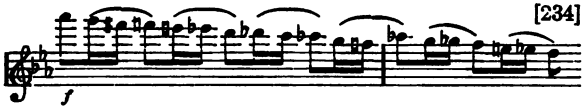
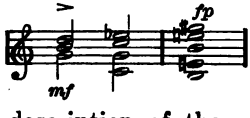
[234]



Clytemnestra, struck speechless, listens in abject terror to a description of her ultimate fate. She shall flee through rooms and corridors, the pursuers hot on her track, until a dark wall bars her escape. There will stand the shade of Agamemnon, and she shall be forced to its feet and time be afforded her to realize her crimes and the bitterness of their punishment before the fatal hatchet descends. The only new motive used in this passage depicts ELECTRA'S TRIUMPH: —

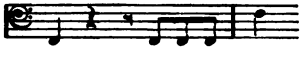
XXVIII. ELECTRA'S TRIUMPH.

[239–240]



During the description of the agonized pause before the end, the kettledrums persistently beat out No. X: —

[247–254]



In an orchestral climax of supreme power, the motives of Electra and Electra's Triumph, and the Doom and Death-blow motives resound under

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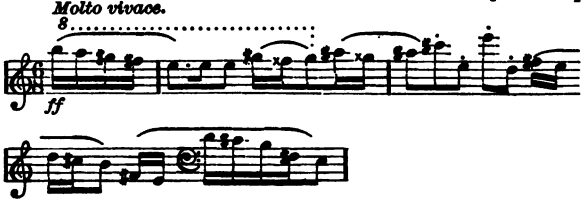
a sustained tremolo of the strings. While the tremolo continues, however, there is a violent change in action and music alike. The confidante comes running forward and whispers to Clytemnestra. The latter seems at first not to understand, but quickly collects herself, beckons for torches, and causes the message to be repeated. The stage is soon filled with light. Clytemnestra, a moment before cowering pitifully before Electra, assumes a mien of fierce joy; she raises both hands in a threatening gesture to her daughter and hastens away. The false news of Orestes' death has just been brought to her. No word is spoken during this short pantomimic scene, but the orchestra depicts Clytemnestra's evil exultation in what may be called a demoniacal Scherzo. There is little new thematic material; Clytemnestra's unholy glee is indicated in No. XXIX, her malicious triumph in No. XXX: —

XXIX. Clytemnestra's Wicked Glee.

[260–261]



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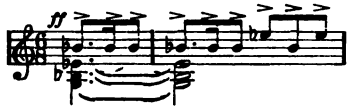
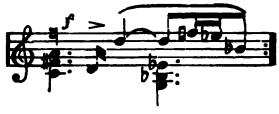
XXX. CLYTEMNESTRA'S TRIUMPH. [265]

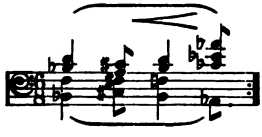


The motive of the Dream of Orestes and the theme of Doom (both A and B) are bandied about contemptuously in rapid $\frac{6}{8}$ time as the queen casts all her guilty fears to the winds: —

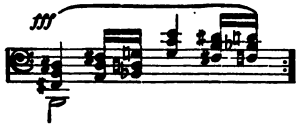
XX*a*. [266]



XVI A. [261]



XVI B. [273]



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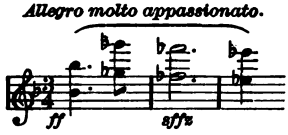
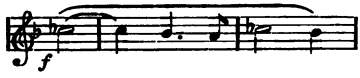
Electra is not long left wondering at her mother's sudden change of front. Chrysothemis rushes in, shrieking that Orestes is dead. A poignant motive expresses her GRIEF: —

XXXI A. GRIEF FOR ORESTES. [1*a*]



The above motive occurs throughout the lament of Chrysothemis, interwoven sometimes with a counter-theme: —

XXXI B. [1*a*, etc.]

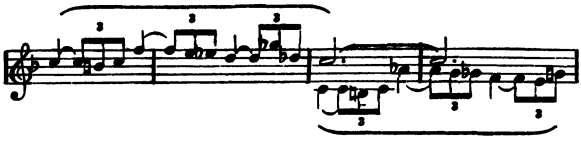


sometimes with a variant of the Chrysothemis motive: —

XV*a*. [13*a*]

and again with imitative fragments of No. XI: —

XI*a*.



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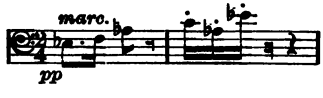
Electra hears the despairing wail of Chrysothemis with stubborn incredulity, absolutely refusing to believe that Orestes is dead. But now the sisters are interrupted by two servants, — a young fellow, evidently of the Ægisthus faction, and a dark-visaged man, one of Agamemnon's old retainers. The former boisterously commands that a horse be saddled, for he is to carry the news to Ægisthus, and the latter sullenly obeys. The episode relieves the mood of distracted grief by a ray of lightness and humor. Musically, it is built up on the motive of Ægisthus (see 26*a*–33*a*).

Electra is now unwillingly convinced of Orestes' death. Without wasting time or words, she decides to take up the task of retribution in place of her brother. Her motive assumes another new form, one of firm RESOLUTION: —

III*c*. ELECTRA (RESOLUTION).

[33*a*–34*a*]



Against this is set the hesitation of Chrysothemis (No. XIV) who falteringly tries to grasp Electra's fearful purpose. Electra appeals pas-

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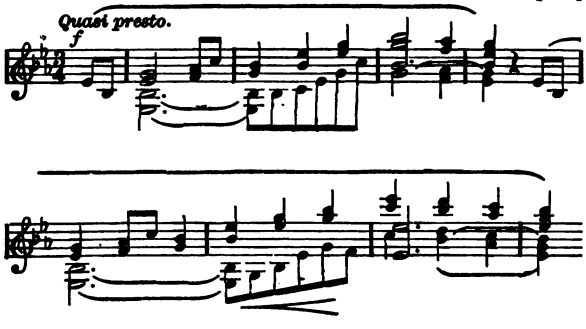
sionately to her sister, looking to her youthful strength for aid. In a beautiful song she praises the virginal beauty and vigor of Chrysothemis. The main theme of the song is new, though obviously derived from the motive of Agamemnon: —

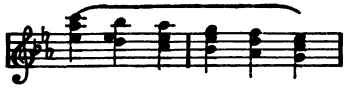
XXXII.

[52a]



Another phrase, XXXII*a*,

[53a]



plays an important part, and there are citations from the song of Chrysothemis. In addition, a THEME OF CONSUMMATION, of great importance in the final scene, here makes its first appearance: —

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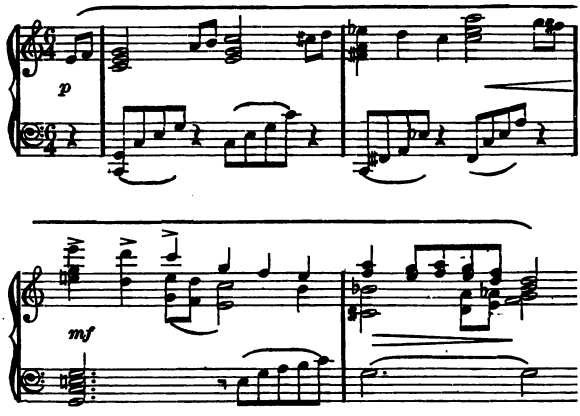
XXXIII. Consummation.

[75a] [237a]



The splendid rhythmic sweep subsides into a quieter $\frac{4}{4}$ time, a lovely passage wherein Strauss gives an example of his contrapuntal skill by imitative treatment of the theme of Agamemnon's Children (see pp. 148–151 of the vocal score). Electra promises that all the desires of Chrysothemis shall be fulfilled; husband and children shall be hers, and Electra will wait on her at her marriage, will put her first-born into her arms, will tend her with more than sisterly love, nay, will serve her as a slave. The motives of Service and Motherhood are worked out elo-

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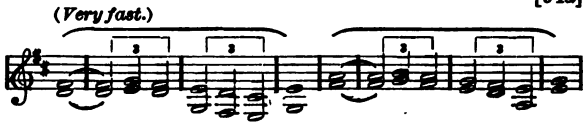
quently, the latter departing somewhat from its original form: —

XIX*a*.

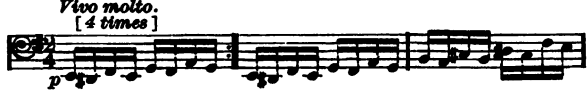
[94*a*]



One dreadful, necessary deed, continues Electra, will win for Chrysothemis lifelong freedom and happiness. And now the motives of Hatred, the Shade of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra's Death-blow, and the Hatchet reappear turbulently after long silence. Electra endeavors to exact a promise of help for that very night, but the horror-stricken Chrysothemis refuses and tears herself forcibly away. Electra, excited to frenzy, hurls a curse after her and at once proceeds to dig up the hatchet, which she has buried in expectation of Orestes' return. A restless passage pictures her toil: —

XXXIV. Electra digging.

[110*a*]



She has not been long at work before Orestes is seen standing in the gateway of the court. His

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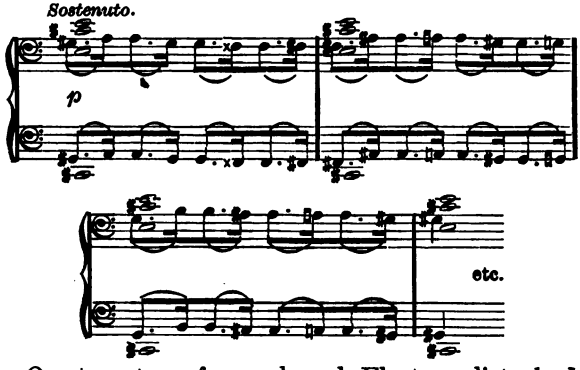
appearance is announced by the MOTIVE OF THE STRANGER.* This steals in at first as an unobtrusive tremolo above the digging motive, but it is subsequently heard in the more distinct shape given below: —

XXXV. THE STRANGER. [126*a*]



Orestes steps forward and Electra, disturbed at her labors, invites him with scant politeness to go his way and leave her in peace. The stranger, however, declares that he must remain; "he and another who is with him bear a message" to Clytemnestra. A mysterious motive represents the real MISSION OF ORESTES†: —

* "The messenger of woe," according to the German Guide, — a quite permissible name for the motive.

† Confused by the German Guide with Electra's Triumph (No. XXVIII).

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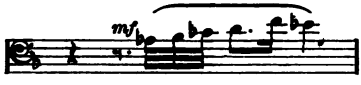
XXXVI. Orestes' Mission.

[123a]

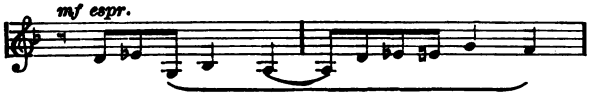
This motive is followed by a pathetic phrase: —

[123a]



The scene between Orestes and Electra is extraordinarily beautiful. The first portion of it is pervaded by Nos. XXXV and XXXVI. The motive of the Stranger is often repeated, gaining in melancholy loveliness first by combination with the motive of Grief (XXXI A) and later by the addition of a new counterpoint: —

[128a]



The motive of Agamemnon's Children suggests the relationship of brother and sister before a question from Orestes leads Electra to divulge her name. She is so disfigured by the hardships she

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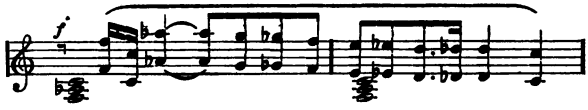
has undergone that Orestes can hardly believe her. Two new motives are introduced, one of DISFIGUREMENT: —

XXXVII. DISFIGUREMENT.

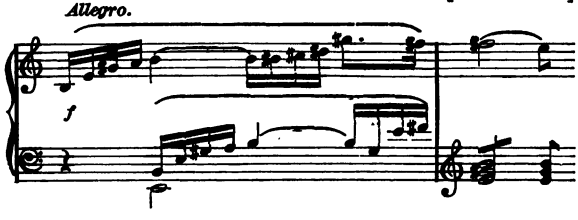
[136*a*–137*a*]



[compare motive of Agamemnon, I*b*] and one of RECOGNITION: —

XXXVIII. RECOGNITION.

[before 138*a*]



Orestes now loses no time in relieving Electra's evident anguish at his supposed death. He tells her that "Orestes lives," and the first three notes of the MOTIVE OF ORESTES are called *pianissimo* by the trumpet*: —

* As these three notes are often used alone, I shall refer to them for convenience as the "Orestes Call."

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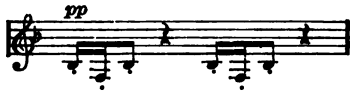
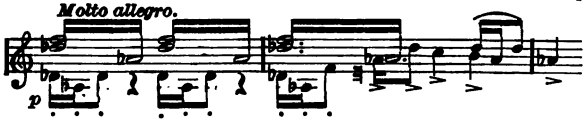
[141*a*]



Soon the entire motive appears: —

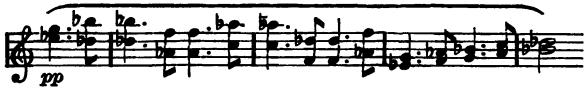
XXXIX. Orestes.

[141*a*–142*a*]



Electra, deeply moved, asks with dawning comprehension, "Who then art thou?" A joyous phrase is heard: —

[142*a*; see also 222*a*]



and the old dark-visaged servant, followed by three others, runs noiselessly in to kiss Orestes' hand. Orestes responds to Electra's renewed questioning, "The dogs in the courtyard recognize me, and not my own sister?" Electra is convinced, and the tumult of her emotion is marvellously expressed by Strauss. The revulsion of feeling makes her brain reel; she stands

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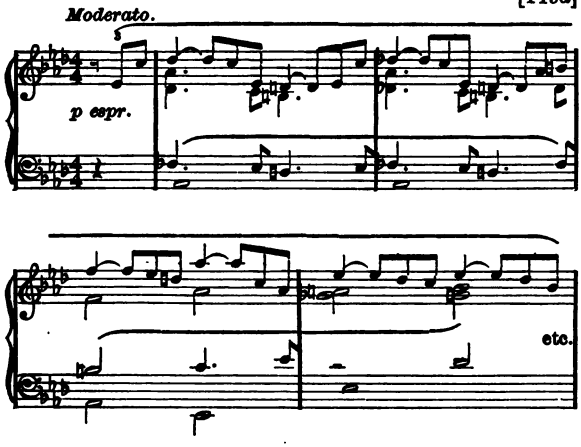
speechless and panting while the orchestra breaks loose in a whirlwind of harshly conflicting sound. Order and quiet are quickly restored, Electra comes to herself, and, in the joy of seeing Orestes again and knowing him safe, forgets for the time everything else. Her LOVE FOR ORESTES is portrayed in the most exquisitely lyrical passage of the music-drama: —

XL. LOVE FOR ORESTES.

[149a]



This theme is dwelt upon at considerable length, and toward its close is joined by the motive of Agamemnon's Children.

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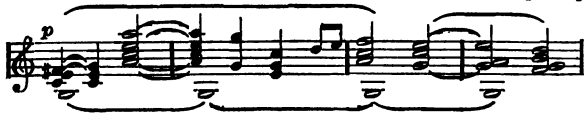
Electra resists Orestes' proffered embrace — she is but the shadow of her former self, no longer fit for endearments. In a touching episode she explains how she has sacrificed all happiness, all the grace and softness of life, to the memory of her father's wrongs. Fragments of the Stranger motive appear, and hints of Electra's lost loveliness are afforded by new treatment of her motive (see 158*a*–163*a*).

The tender mood of the scene eventually gives way as Orestes remembers that he has a stern task before him, a task ordained by the gods. The theme of Consummation (XXXIII) surges up, alternating with the Orestes Call and the motive of his mission. Electra pronounces a Blessing on his undertaking: —

XLI. Electra's Blessing.

[177*a*]



The attendant of Orestes hurries in and reproves the two for wasting time in talk when the slightest indiscretion may betray them. A Call to Battle is sounded: —

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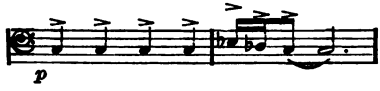
XLII. CALL TO BATTLE.

[181*a*]



Clytemnestra's confidante comes to summon Orestes to the queen's presence. He conquers his horror and enters the palace, the motive of his mission appearing *pianissimo*. A short period of terrible suspense follows. Electra paces restlessly up and down: the violoncellos and basses begin a rushing figure which continually returns to the motive of Clytemnestra's Death-blow: —

XXVII*a*.

[187*a et seq.*]

Electra remembers that she has not been able to give the hatchet to Orestes. After a momentary outburst there is another pause, which the basses again fill with suppressed agitation. At last Clytemnestra's piercing scream rends the air. The motive of the Death-blow is repeated *fortissimo:* another scream from within, and the motive of Agamemnon's Shade crashes its way wildly

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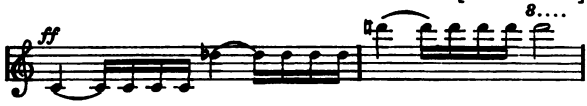
upward, overleaping its natural intervals in mad excitement: —

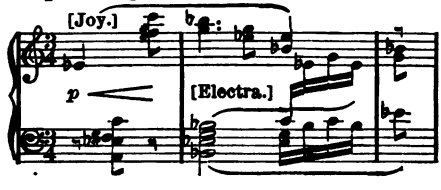
Xa. [before 193a]



Chrysothemis and the maids rush in; there is a scene of wild confusion, during which Electra stands with her back to the door and allows none to enter the palace. The figure of Flight and the Call to Battle alternate beneath a continuous tremolo of the violins.

At this juncture, Ægisthus is seen in the court, and Chrysothemis and the women flee, leaving Electra to receive him with hypocritical courtesy. She pretends to have "come to her senses," takes a torch from its niche in the wall, and officiously lights the way for Ægisthus. Her guarded joy finds tranquil expression in a theme which combines the Electra motive with the motive of Grief, the latter now changed by a turn to the major to a MOTIVE OF JOY: —

poco tranquillo. [203a]



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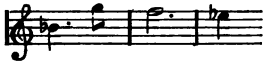
The connection between Nos. XXXI A and the above is better shown a little later on: —

XLIII. Joy (*cf.* XXXI*a*).

[204*a*]



Through Electra's apparent docility there runs a veiled threat, the Dream of Orestes (XX) always hovering near until Ægisthus unsuspectingly goes into the palace to meet his doom. An uproar is heard; he is seen at a window calling for help, but is torn away. The first notes of his theme and the Orestes Call alternate rapidly, suggesting a hand-to-hand struggle: —

[Orestes.] [215*a*–216*a*]

This time there is no suspense; Ægisthus is quickly disposed of. Chrysothemis and the maids re-enter, having discovered that Orestes has returned and accomplished his purpose. The motive of Joy rises exultingly, the theme of Electra's song to Chrysothemis (XXXII) recurs, the battle-cry is transposed to E major, the

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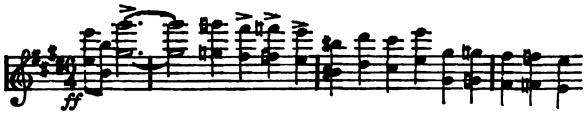
Orestes Call is repeated again and again as the victor's name is shouted by a chorus of men behind the scene; in short, there is a general intensification of the jubilant motives and a transformation of the sad ones. The pathetic motive of Disfigurement is restored, as it were, to a final and triumphant version of the Agamemnon motive: —

Ie.

[228a]



A somewhat slower, more swaying rhythm (see 230a) prepares us for Electra's dance. She has so far been too overcome for speech or action, but now she collects herself and bursts into a pæan of victory which commences (236a) with a combination of her motive with the Orestes Call and the dancing rhythm ♩ ♩ ♪ ♩, then settles down into the majestic sweep of the theme of Consummation (XXXIII), to which farther on the motive of Agamemnon's Children is added (241a). At last Electra begins her dance. The swaying rhythm returns, the motive being derived from the theme of Love for Orestes: —

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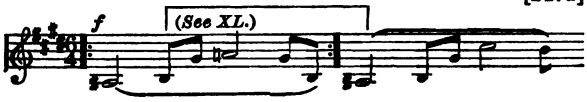
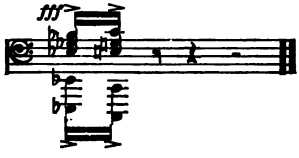
[247*a*]



The dancing variant of the Electra motive (III*b*) is developed at some length (see 249*a*), then the theme of Agamemnon's Children is resumed. The resistless swing of the music continues almost until the last moment. Finally, at the climax of her triumph, Electra drops senseless to the ground. The orchestra reverts to tragedy with the motives of Hatred and Agamemnon's Shade: as Electra falls, a long-sustained chord enters *fortissimo* and dies gradually away. Chrysothemis runs to the door of the palace and calls for Orestes; a moment of silence, and the curtain descends. The music-drama is brought to a close, after four repetitions of the Orestes Call, by the last two chords of the motive of Doom: —

[*Cf.* end of XVI A.]



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